



## The "Ice"-Man Cometh No More (He Gave His Balls to the Revolution)

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horse. The plantation show minstrels, we went down in Texas and there was a certain horse we used to go and see at the fair. We knew these races because they went to the same fairs as we did. There was a horse that we knew would never lose, so we would go out and give the field and the odds. Well, people thought we was crazy—he would always win. But one day they entered a big bay horse on us, and *he* won. We went and grabbed the program, looked, and it was Stepin Fetchit, horse from Baltimore. And so I goes back to show business in Memphis, and hear “Stepin Fetchit! Stepin Fetchit!” from everyone. I wrote a dance song of it called “The Stepin Fetchit, Stepin Fetchit, Turn Around, Stop and Catch It, Chicken Scratch It To the Ground, Etc.”

Me and my partner was introducing this new dance. We were Skeeter and Rastus, The Two Dancing Crows from Dixie. Jennifer Jones’s father booked us in a white theater in Tulsa, Oklahoma, which was unusual. And in place of putting our names Skeeter and Rastus, he put Step and Fetchit and he made that our names. When my partner, he wouldn’t show up, I would tell the maanger, “No, it’s not two of us, it’s just one of us, the Step and Fetchit.” And then I’d go out and do just as good as the two of us. I fired him, since I had wrote the song, see, and in place of The Two Dancing

Crows from Dixie, I was the Stepin Fetchit. I got the lazy idea from my partner. He was so lazy, he used to call a cab to get across the street.

I was in Ripley’s “Believe It or Not” as the onliest man who ever made a million dollars doing nothing. Anything money could buy, I had. I had 14 Chinese servants and all different kinds of cars. This one, a pink Rolls Royce, it had my name on the sides in neon lights. My suits cost \$1,000 each. I got some of them from Rudolph Valentino’s valet after he died. I showed people that just because I had a million dollars, the world wouldn’t come to an end. But then I had to file a \$5 million bankruptcy and didn’t have but \$146 assets. No, I wasn’t held up by no robbers, and I wasn’t in any swindling gambling games. It was all “honest” business people I trusted who took the money, all good, upstanding people. I was too busy makin’ it to think about savin’ it. I started with nothing’ and I got nothin’ left, so I’ve come full circle. But I’m rich. I’m a millionaire. Know the reason why? Because I go to Mass every morning. I have been a daily communicant for the last 50 years. Everything I’ve accomplished I’ve accomplished in believin’ that seek ye first the kingdom of heaven and all things will be given to thee. Consider the lilies of the field . . .

JAMES ROY MACBEAN

## The *Ice*-man Cometh No More (He Gave His Balls to the Revolution)

Robert Kramer’s *Ice* is a “political film” that is not the least bit political. It is an emotionless film that is not the least bit rational. It is a documentary of an imaginary revolution—or, to put it another way, a fictionalized account of

what people like the Weathermen have actually been doing—and yet despite its seemingly objective, emotionless, documentary tone, *Ice* is really a film of very personal (Kramer’s?) fantasies and fears about revolution.

But *Ice* is also a forward-looking film that will undoubtedly be one of the most important American films of the coming decade. (To call it one of the most important American films of the *past* decade, would, in my opinion, be damning it with faint praise.) *Ice* is light-years ahead of the recent rash of Hollywood garbage *on* revolution. Whatever blind spots there may be in *Ice*—and there are deep ones—they are, for better or worse, the blind spots of the revolutionary movement itself—or at least that part of the movement which is actively engaged in terrorist activity and likes to think of itself as the “armed vanguard” of the revolution. (Incidentally, if we hadn’t realized it before, *Ice* ought to make us realize—although this is perhaps not at all Kramer’s intention—that Lenin’s notion of the armed vanguard urgently needs to be reconsidered, criticized, and placed in a new and hopefully more genuinely liberating revolutionary perspective than has been the case thus far in history.)

In many ways, *Ice* is a film made with and for this would-be “vanguard.” Using non-actors recruited from the ranks of student activists and urban militant groups around New York, Kramer made *Ice* independently, with some financial support from the American Film Institute, shooting it with a small crew of friends and *Newsreel* associates. (*Newsreel*’s organization, however, apparently disowns the film—or at least disowns any official association with it.)

Although, cinematically, there is much of the *Newsreel*-style, “direct,” documentary approach in *Ice*, nonetheless, the film has an eclectic array of antecedents. The film which *Ice* resembles most is perhaps Louis Feuillade’s 1913 *Fantomas*, a legendary serial-thriller in which—as in *Ice*—the straightforward camera technique and the natural decor of the city are in dramatic contrast to the fragmented narrative and its fantastic aura of conspiracy. Likewise, Fritz Lang’s *Mabuse* films—particularly the early *Mabuse der Spieler*—would also seem to be antecedents of *Ice*, although not for their

expressionist sensibility, but for the non-linear narrative and fantastic web of sinister adventures. Then, too, *Ice* recalls Godard’s *Alphaville* for its eerie projection of the dehumanized future already at work in the urban metropolises of the present; and there are overt borrowings from Godard’s recent militant films in Kramer’s use of placards, slogans, intercut footage, and agit-prop theater. Finally, *Ice* betrays its debts to the American cinema (particularly Fuller, Walsh, and Hawks) in its fascination with violence and in its typically American brand of “social criticism” (characteristic of the films of Frank Capra, as well as the three named above) that rests on the surface phenomena of behavior while neglecting entirely the analysis of underlying socio-economic causes.

*Ice* was well-received in France last spring in the *Semaine de la Critique* portion of the Cannes Festival, then in Paris (where I first saw it) a few weeks later. Now the film is being shown on various university campuses around the US, usually under the sponsorship of one or another radical organization, and it is often given an in-person “political introduction” either by Kramer himself or by someone connected with the radical movement. (Jennifer Dohrn, Bernardine’s sister, was scheduled to introduce the film at the Stanford screening I attended recently; but she didn’t show.) Local militant groups seem to make a point of coming out in full force to see *Ice* and to rap over what’s usable in the film and what’s not—often during the projection itself, which, at Stanford, was regularly punctuated with shouts of “Right on!” “Off the pig!” and “Bullshit!”—with the reaction seemingly determined less by what was said or done in the film than by whether or not the militants in the audience could identify with the militants on the screen. (Yes, Virginia, even militants go to the movies to identify.)

Nominally set in some indeterminate near future when *Amerika* is carrying on its latest chapter of imperialist war (this time in Mexico), *Ice* focusses on the urban-guerrilla activities of

an underground network of youthful revolutionaries who are youthful in years only. If there is anything "documented" in *Ice*, it is the freezing-up of the personality among militant youth. But even this chilling phenomenon is not presented as a process: we see only the frozen surface of a *fait accompli*. So thorough is the depersonalization in *Ice* that we never really know who is who in the film, for the people look alike (middle-class American softness), talk alike (tonelessly), and carry out the Central Command's orders with a like mechanical flatness. Moreover, Kramer's mosaic-like construction of the narrative prevents us from following any one militant and turning the film into *his* story. *Ice* remains, from beginning to end, the coldly impersonal story of militancy itself.

And, paradoxically, Kramer both dwells on the depersonalization of his militants and, at the same time, steadfastly refuses any attempt at analyzing either the causes or effects of this emotional freeze. In the end, one gets the

feeling that Kramer wants you to know that he's aware of the existence of certain psychological problems in the militant movement; but that, as far as he's concerned, an individual's personal hang-ups only matter if they get in the way of his functioning as a revolutionary. Emotions—in this view—are blown up all out of proportion by bourgeois society and its cult of individualism. So far, so good, it seems to me. But carried to its extreme—and *Ice* carries it this far, at least implicitly—this argument leads one to the position that most if not all of our so-called "human emotions" are actually degenerate behavior patterns of a degenerate social order. And, as such, they are not only expendable; they are obstacles that must be eliminated if we are to build a more enlightened society.

But the loss on the emotional side in *Ice*, quite apart from any consideration of the psychological damage that might accompany this loss, is not compensated for by any gain—or even any holding of one's own—on the rational



side. Kramer doesn't seem the slightest bit interested in any rational, analytical considerations other than pragmatic ones. Even tactical questions are treated in a truncated shorthand which lops off all but the pragmatic questions of who will handle this and who will handle that, and that's that. And even here, the point is made in the film that it doesn't matter who does what. When emotions have been "offed" and individual differences are blurred, you no longer have to match the right man for the right job: when everyone is alike, each is equally qualified—at least to go out and kill.

Completely lacking in *Ice* is the patient, down-to-earth wisdom of a Mao or a Ho Chi Minh or a Fidel, who take great pains (actually, great joy) in explaining to the masses the political considerations that go not only into every policy-making decision, but also into every *method* of arriving at a decision—whether in economics, military strategy and tactics, art and culture, or whatever. In *Ice*, Kramer pays lip service to increasing the consciousness of the masses—placards at the beginning of the film announce that originally terrorist activity was aimed at provoking the state into ever greater and more overt repression; while now, it is asserted, the purpose of terrorist activity is to convince the entire population of the need for armed struggle against the state. But implicit in this argument itself—as well as in the film as a whole—is the predilection for *intimidation* rather than rational persuasion as the way to deal with the consciousness of the people. And when Kramer's militants "occupy" a high-rise (home of the masses?) for a few hours in order to show the occupants a "political film" and to discuss with them, this potentially "educational" maneuver is really only a show of strength to intimidate them. Speaking to the hastily assembled occupants, one militant says: "We took this place over today, and we'll be back to take it over again any time we want. The SECPO [Security Police] isn't anywhere near as strong as they want you to fear."

In short, when it comes to intimidation tactics to keep people in line, the militants and

the police talk the same language. And ultimately, the high-rise sequence—like so much in the film—is really only another pretext for Kramer to force the viewer into dealing with the most controversial, indeed most explosive aspect of revolution—the actual detonation of violence.

Something goes wrong in the high-rise occupation—exactly what we don't know. The militants take it on the lam, guns in hand. Somebody starts shooting at them—who we don't know. They shoot back. Somebody gets killed and somebody gets wounded. The rest of the militants manage to get away and carry their wounded with them. They will live to fight another day. And that's *all* they will live for—and all they *want* to live for. Perhaps they could tell us why. After all, there are plenty of reasons for revolution in America. But Kramer isn't interested in explanations.

The notion of *force* is central to this film, not just because *Ice* deals with terrorist force, but also because the film forces the viewer to deal with terrorist force on the terrorist's own terms. Kramer has indicated (see *Film Quarterly*, Winter 1968–69) that he views his filmmaking activity as "a way of getting at people, not by making concessions to where they are, but by showing them where you are and then forcing them to deal with that, bringing out all their assumptions, their prejudices, their imperfect perceptions." And the way to force the viewer to deal with his "reality," Kramer believes, is to "make films that . . . explode like grenades in people's faces, or open minds like a good can-opener"—in short, "convert our audience or neutralize them, threaten."

It is unlikely, however, that many people are going to be converted to revolutionary terrorism by seeing *Ice*; and it is safe to assume, I think, that in making this film, Kramer was aiming not so much at converting the audience as at neutralizing—or, to be precise, at *neuterizing*—them. And in doing so, Kramer went to the point of neuterizing himself, right there on screen, in a grisly sequence of torture ap-

plied to the genitals of one of the militants—played by Kramer himself.

As violent scenes go, this one is particularly gruesome. Castration—if *Ice* is any indication—may be the most hard-to-watch violence imaginable. And Kramer springs it on us so suddenly we don't even know who is doing what to whom. (Even in castration, *Ice* remains coldly impersonal.) All we see is someone kicked into an alleyway, men scuffling, somebody is knocked down, pants loosened, a surgical instrument resembling a long fish hook thrust under the opened fly, and a sudden, spasmodic arching of the back as the victim lets out a horrible, semiconscious moan of pain.

Whether the torture is inflicted by police informers, a right-wing vigilante group, or disident co-conspirators, is never made clear. Nor are the motives. There is only the brute fact of violence, the horrifying experience of it, and the need to somehow go on functioning as a revolutionary even if you can no longer function as a man.

What is really horrifying about *Ice*, however, is that Kramer seems to seek out the most self-destructive and dehumanizing forms of violence—both physical and psychological violence—and to dwell on them until they seem to be necessary (and sufficient?) elements in the making of good revolutionaries. For Kramer, you don't function as a good revolutionary in spite of no longer functioning as a man, but *because* of it. The chilling message of *Ice* is that you've got to give up everything to the revolution—including your balls.

One could argue, however—and maybe this is one of Kramer's points—that giving up their balls is no great loss for the militants, since—as several frozen “sex” scenes indicate—they are too emotionally blocked to get much use out of them. Or even if they do manage to bring it off now and then, they seem too devoid of feeling to get much pleasure out of it. (One young militant—not the castration-victim—fails to make it with a huge-breasted chick because, as he tells her, he's hung-up over the

various forms of sexual torture that await him if he's captured.)

As for the female militants of *Ice*, while they at least seem un-hung-up enough to take care of their sex needs, there doesn't seem to be any indication that sex, for them either, is anything more than a matter of personal hygiene—a momentary relaxing exercise in a hard revolutionary day. And whether they are in bed or in battle, the people in the film are not so much individuals as mere cogs—interchangeable parts in the wheel of revolution—or, as Brecht put it (in *The Measures Taken*), “blank pages on which the revolution writes its instructions.”

Superficially, at least, there are some interesting parallels between *Ice* and *The Measures Taken*. Both deal with the problems of prerevolutionary agitation and the role of the militant cell. Both reflect (although in different degrees—and perhaps with different attitudes towards it) on the necessary submersion of the individual in the collective. Brecht's 1930 *Lehrstück* contains a song “In Praise of Clandestine Work” which extols the virtues of anonymity, and the Brechtian militants undergo a ritual “blotting out” of their own identity by putting on masks.

In *Ice*, however, Kramer doesn't need to use masks, for his militants seem to have no real identity to blot out. Nor do Kramer's militants—unlike Brecht's—have to deal with anyone who is not just like them, so what would be the need for masks anyway? (The one near exception in *Ice*—aside from a slick cyberneticist who simply outplays the militants in their own game of power-politics, as well as outplaying them in pool—is a slightly mad bookseller who, although he hangs around with the would-be revolutionaries, is really more of a leftover beatnik who hasn't quite been assimilated yet into revolutionary culture. Incidentally, he is just about the only individualized character in the film—and, significantly enough, the militants' way of dealing with him is either to bully him or to ignore him.)

It is important to note, however, that Kramer's and Brecht's conceptions of prerevolutionary agitation are very different. The point is made sharply and repeatedly in *The Measures Taken* that the Marxist militants do not fruitfully nurture the seeds of revolution by blustering in out-of-season with guns and tanks or even with trains and plowshares, but rather by addressing themselves to the political consciousness of the masses. "To the ignorant, instruction about their condition; to the oppressed, class consciousness; and to the class-conscious, the experience of revolution"—this is the program carried out by Brecht's agitators. In *Ice*, however, Kramer is obviously interested only in the latter—and even there he doesn't seem interested in the experience of revolution as a whole, but only in the experience of violence.

But the most important difference between Brecht's and Kramer's treatment of prerevolutionary militancy is that what Brecht sees as a *dialectical* tension between the individual and the collective, between spontaneity and organization, between emotions that border on sentimentality and rationality that borders on inhumanness, Kramer doesn't see dialectically at all. In fact, Kramer simply does away with one whole side of the dialectic by choking off any hint of the individual, the spontaneous, and the emotional. Moreover, for Kramer, the collective and the principle of organization are not even conceived as correlatives of rationality—they are mere vehicles for violence. Bombing, shooting, and burning is all you need, baby! And if you get your balls cut off in the action, well, *tant pis*, you might be a better revolutionary without all those distracting sexual needs!

Clearly, Kramer's preoccupation with violence has very strong overtones of the obsessive. The relation he sets up between the practice of revolutionary violence and castration is a particularly revealing indication of the deep-seated psychosexual tensions involved in the terrorist's life-style—and Kramer's decision to

play the rôle of the castrated militant himself is all the more revealing.

Granted, Kramer might argue that playing this rôle himself simply seemed the best way of making the point that the revolutionary has got to be prepared to give up everything for the revolution. The castration scene—combined with its victim's subsequent ability to carry on as a revolutionary—would thus function as a cinematic exposition of the militant slogan "Forget your life: serve the people." Certainly the film as a whole seems aimed at convincing us that although the terrorist's lot is a hard and depersonalizing one, nonetheless he manages to live on and advance the revolution. But what Kramer may fail to consider is the possibility that the freezing-up of the personality, the blocked affectivity, and the psychosexual tensions of the militants may not merely be necessary but surmountable consequences of militant activity, but rather, at least in part, the internal causes of it.

The psychological dynamics of emotional deprivation among young middle-class militants have recently been explored by psychoanalyst Herbert Hendin, who utilized psychoanalytical interviewing techniques (free association, dreams, and fantasies) to conduct a battery of interviews with militant students from Columbia and Barnard. The emotional detachment of these militants, towards one another and, especially, towards their parents, Hendin argued, "usually conceals pain too difficult for the students to face. Their acute ability to see and feel the flaws of society is in striking contrast to their need not to see and know the often devastating effects their family life has had on them."\* In case after case, Hendin found that the militants he interviewed reported experiencing early in life—and often very profoundly—a withdrawal of affection or complete emotional abandonment by their parents.

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\*See "A Psychoanalyst Looks at Student Revolutionaries," *The New York Times Magazine*, Jan 17, 1971.

Significantly, the militants now felt that they, too, were unlikely or unable to experience any sustained or profound emotional involvement with other people; but this fact was invariably rationalized in such a way as to pass this weakness off as a strength—either a rejection of bourgeois individualism or, paradoxically, self-sufficiency—or by projecting the pent-up resentment and hostility they felt at having been emotionally abandoned onto the outside world. “If you show your feelings, you get your legs cut off,” was one young militant’s way of putting it.

The parallels between what Hendin discovered in his depth-interviews and what one can sense underlying the frozen surface of *Ice* are really quite striking. In both cases, the world of others—whether undifferentiated or concentrated in the concept of “the repressive State”—is feared as a menacing, castrating monster—a vampire which, in the words of one of the militants in *Ice*, “wants to suck all our energy out of us and destroy us sexually.” And in both cases there seems to be a strong need to see only the smooth surface of the emotional freeze—and to see it as “politically” positive—while the other nine-tenths of the psychic iceberg remains something one prefers not to see.

Hendin reports, for example, that his radical subjects often recounted dreams or actual childhood anecdotes which they enjoyed talking about in political terms—rationalizing out any personal emotional content and replacing it with a more or less political interpretation. Thus, one young man’s dream of being caught in a barbed-wire fence while fleeing the scene of some terrorist maneuver, of being badly cut and bleeding, of being captured and placed in a detention camp, did not lead him to acknowledge any fears or ambivalence about his violent activities; but simply brought forth the assertion that society’s only way to stop the radical movement was the use of widespread repression. That the latter may very well be true, however, does not really go far towards helping the individual come to terms with his own

repressed tensions.\* Likewise, it seems to me, in Kramer’s case: he may offer a “political” rationalization for castration; but the very fact that he even formulates his thoughts and fantasies about revolution in terms of castration would seem to indicate deep psychological tensions that are not likely to be resolved by tough talk about how a revolutionary has got to be able to take it.

Admittedly, however, the militant’s life-style offers him certain psychological advantages which he perhaps cannot find elsewhere. As Hendin observes, when a violent action by the militants arouses a violent reaction from the authorities, at least the militants can feel for once that they are eliciting some adequate response to themselves as persons. And the intoxication of violent confrontation—in an otherwise mechanical and emotionless existence—can rapidly become addictive, especially in a “revolutionary culture” which rewards violent behavior and exerts great pressure on the individual to prove himself through violence. In short, as Hendin points out, “many individuals have found in the revolutionary culture a ‘family’ which understands their emotional needs better than their real families ever did.”

Likewise, the militants’ readiness to resort to violence may be traceable, at least in part, to the pent-up resentment and hostility they feel over their childhood experience of rejection or emotional abandonment. In *Ice*, for example, Kramer tosses in offhandedly a terse parent-child confrontation that would be hilarious if it weren’t so crudely evocative of what is really at issue. A callow, post-adolescent (Jewish) boy argues with his “liberal,” uptight parents over the harboring of a seriously

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\*In the above case, for example, Hendin (drawing on further case material) concluded that the young man who dreamed of being put in a camp actually had an unacknowledged wish that some sort of authority would step in and prevent him from continuing the potentially destructive and self-destructive activities in which he was engaged.



wounded girl comrade, whom the parents want removed from the house—supposedly for “her own good.” The son, however, demands that she stay put. The sequence hardly gets under way when it immediately boils over—with the son lunging at the father and screaming “You’ll do what I say or I’ll kill you!”

Typically, Kramer cuts away at this point, and the film moves on to some other fragment of the revolutionary mosaic—never to return to the Oedipal struggle, and never really giving us much of an idea of the general outline of the revolutionary picture as a whole. As for the psychological problems in the revolutionary movement, it’s hard to say what position Kramer takes. Ultimately, it’s as if Kramer started out to deliver a hard-fisted, tough-talking eulogy of the militant movement, then found himself repeatedly coming out with Freudian slips that threw the movement into question; and finally decided “to hell with Freud, the revolution will advance in spite of all these hang-ups—or maybe even *because* of them!”

It’s the latter position, however, that seems to fascinate Kramer the most. In the father-son confrontation—as in the film as a whole—one has the impression that it’s mainly the psychological hang-ups of the individuals that push them to violence. And there’s almost a smug sort of implicit acceptance of this fact—as if Kramer were saying “So what? The quicker we get to real gut-level violence, the quicker we’ll bring about our revolution.”

As a revolutionary strategy, however, this attitude is full of grave inconsistencies that are harmful—and perhaps even *suicidal*—to the cause of revolution. While this is not the place to analyze this problem in detail [see “Terrorism and the Movement,” by Charles Derber, in *Monthly Review*, February 1971], there are certain observations which—by way of conclusion—should serve to situate Kramer’s *Ice* within the terrorist context. First, on the all-important question of timing, Kramer is particularly irresponsible. He sets his film in a vague fu-

ture that is an all too transparent veil for the present—but, in doing so, he indulges in dream-like projections of a future he invites us to believe is already here. (In many ways, *Ice* seems to function largely as a form of wish-fulfilment—an insidious attempt to actualize the impossible through dreaming it.) And in revolutionary terrorism—where the dangers of miscalculating the situation and moving prematurely are so great—Kramer’s confusionism can be disastrous. (Marcuse has recently reminded us that, historically, terrorism has never been effective except when used as a mopping-up operation *after* taking power.)

Second, *Ice* itself—like terrorism—errs in omission as well as in what it does do. And *Ice*’s omissions are particularly deplorable, for if there is anything the revolutionary movement in America needs in order to effect meaningful change, it’s rigorous Marxian analysis of the economic foundations and ideological superstructure of American capitalism. (Huey Newton isn’t lecturing to Oakland High School kids on how to make molotov cocktails; he’s lecturing on Marxism—and getting the students to understand the need to arm themselves theoretically as well as practically.)

Finally—and most important of all—*Ice* illustrates almost in spite of itself the way in which the cause of revolutionary liberation can be betrayed from within, betrayed by paramilitary structures that mirror the hated structures of the militaristic society we seek to destroy. And the loss of the truly *liberating* qualities of revolution amounts to the loss of the revolution itself.

By equivocating—by not clearly taking a stand and unveiling this betrayal for what it is—Kramer is an accomplice to it. In the end, and in spite of its revolutionary aspirations, *Ice* is really more of a science-fiction horror film than a political film. But see it; criticize it; and prove it wrong.